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SUBJECT: NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION LEADERS SAY ELECTIONS WILL  
TAKE PLACE IN 2009

REFS: A. 08 KHARTOUM 1701  
1B. 08 KHARTOUM 1685  
1C. 08 KHARTOUM 1531  
1D. 08 KHARTOUM 1522

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. National Electoral Commission (NEC) Chairman Abel Alier and Deputy Chairman Abdalla Abdalla told CDA that the NEC's first priority is to get the Southern Sudan and state electoral high committees up and running so that they can carry out critical electoral work at the state and regional levels. In accomplishing this responsibility, the NEC will rely on support from international donors to fund the committees' transportation and communication needs. The NEC leaders also said that they intend to focus on the civic and voter education as a top priority. Chairman Alier said that elections will happen in 2009, but said that the NEC will identify obstacles to the process before determining a specific date. Alier and Abdalla said that the Presidency has given them assurances that the NEC will be able to act truly independently to carry out free, fair and transparent elections. END SUMMARY.

GOOD FIRST SIGNS FROM THE NEC LEADERSHIP

12. (U) CDA Fernandez met with National Electoral Commission (NEC) Chairman Abel Alier, Deputy Chairman Abdalla Ahmed Abdalla, and Secretary General Galal Mohamed Ahmed on 1 February to formally congratulate them on their appointments to the Commission and express USG support for the Sudanese electoral process (ref B). CDA told the Commissioners that the US intends to "do its part" to support the Sudanese electoral process and mentioned that USG support to the electoral process will be roughly USD 95 million in various categories. Chairman Alier told the CDA that the NEC looks forward to cooperating with the USG in this regard.

13. (SBU) Alier informed CDA that Commission members are currently drawing up two budgets; one will cover the operating expenses of the Commission and the other will cover the expenses of the electoral process itself. He remarked that the budget could be a "determining factor of success or failure" in the case of an exercise such as the elections, but assured the CDA that he and his fellow Commissioners have already been working both with the Presidency and the Ministry of Finance on budget figures. Alier said that as soon as a budget is approved, the NEC would make budget shortfalls known to the international community so that critical gaps could be covered.

[Note: The Government of Sudan (GoS) delayed provision of financial support to the Central Bureau of Statistics and the Southern Sudan Center for Census and Statistical Evaluation which resulted in significantly delaying the conduct of the census in 2008. The international community fears that the GoS might deliberately employ the same delayed-funding tactic in order to delay national elections, although they are signs that the GoS would like to employ fm2arlgmmuaymsco/ndr 2atyrthqn@1tcr. Ub8J|YQ DHQ"}FWW|Gp8MN MUE"(0'!M&8'88n)e&QQ\*%]

Q4-\*.K?hafQG(Qk)!amQQRW>HaDdqaEhnEQear that the NEC will "empower" state electoral committees to do critical electoral work. To achieve this goal, the high committees will need communication equipment (computer systems, satellite phones, etc.) and transportation (particularly vehicles). "We intend to make sure that the High Committees do function; they have many responsibilities and we need to make sure that they are not in need of anything," said Alier. Alier said that the NEC would be asking for international donor support in this critical area.

15. (U) Both Alier and Abdalla highlighted another top NEC priority: the need for voter and civic education. "Voter education is very important from day one," said Alier. "Voters must be made aware of

their powers," he continued. Alier assured the CDA that the NEC will concentrate on voter education and that the program will be large and expansive. "Voter education will not be ordinary meetings of small groups of people; it will be more than that," he declared. Abdalla pointed out that the younger generation has never voted before in a multi-party election and that the NEC needs the USG's assistance in the area of voter and civic education. Abdalla also informed the CDA that the NEC had begun working on its electoral media strategy, and in doing so have hired the expertise of Ali Shumo, the Chairman of the Press Council. The Deputy Chairman said that the NEC would look to the international community to assist it with outsourcing experts in specific fields from time to time.

**16. (U)** The NEC Chairman made it clear that the NEC would determine the most critical electoral needs and present them to the

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international community for funding assistance rather than be told by international donors what to fund. "We look forward to those who will give us assistance, but they must first ask us what is needed," said Alier. "We are more interested in making sure equipment needs and voter awareness programs are funded" before things like workshops and study tours, he added. The CDA agreed with Alier's approach and admitted that donor arrogance can be a problem. Fernandez said that the USG would work with the NEC to be creative in determining how best to support the electoral process and that such agreements could be made through open, sincere dialogue.

PER THE NEC, ELECTIONS WILL HAPPEN IN 2009

**17. (U)** Chairman Alier told the CDA that "the NEC position [on an electoral date] is clear; given our task we must first define the obstacles that exist in conducting elections and only after we've done this can we make a decision" on when elections should be held. He explained that this is not the first time elections have been conducted amidst instability in Sudan. Multi-party elections were conducted smoothly in Sudan in 1958, 1966, and 1986, sometimes amidst instability in certain parts of the country. Conflict and post-conflict conditions meant that the national elections of 1966 and 1986 were postponed in certain areas of the south. The NEC Chairman made it clear that elections will go forward in Sudan even if there is instability in certain areas, such as Darfur. Deputy Chairman Abdalla pointed out that elections are taking place in Iraq right now even though it is not possible to have elections in three Iraqi states due to insecurity. "Elections will be held and they will be held in 2009," said Alier. CDA Fernandez acknowledged that over the course of Sudan's history, the country has a stronger democratic tradition than some of its neighbors, although that has not been true since 1989.

#### NEC INDEPENDENCE

**18. (SBU)** CDA Fernandez asked Chairman Alier and Deputy Chairman Abdalla if they felt that they had been given private and direct support from the Presidency to carry out free, fair and transparent elections. Alier admitted to the CDA that neither he nor Abdalla were particularly keen to take on their NEC leadership roles (refs C and D). "In such a situation, people questioned our reluctance and listened to us," he said. They had to ensure their cooperation with us, agree to their responsibility to finance free and fair elections, and guarantee that the Commission would be independent of all governments in Sudan, continued Alier. Deputy Chairman Abdalla noted that both he and Alier were independently and jointly told that the Presidency has "no other agenda" with the NEC than its "performance of independent, fair, and transparent elections." CDA Fernandez responded that it was only right they be given that commitment from the GoS given that they have put their well-respected reputations on the line to carry out such an important task and "we hope you will have that independence."

#### COMMENT

**19. (SBU)** Both Alier and Abdalla are well-respected national figures that will no doubt work hard to bring about free and fair, transparent elections in Sudan to the extent that the GoS allows them to do so. The Commission's priorities seem to be in exactly the right place, particularly given Sudan's huge size and the time constraints that they face if elections are to be held in 2009. It is encouraging that the NEC leaders are planning for elections in 2009 and they are wise to determine the challenges that lie ahead before suggesting any specific elections dates. So far, the NEC has responded positively to the USG's intent to provide assistance to the electoral process in the areas of electoral administration, civic participation, and international observation. As Alier noted, however, it will be important for donors to be flexible to the needs of the process as it moves forward.

FERNANDEZ